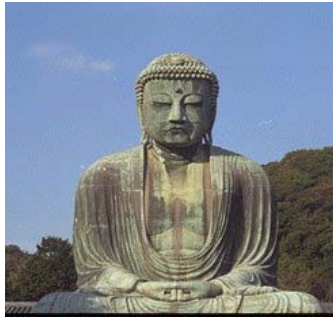


Buddhism

Origins. Buddhism originated in northern India under the leadership of **Siddhartha Gautama** (sid-HAHR-tah GOW-tuh-muh, 566 - 486 B.C.), known as the first Buddha. Under Emperor **Ashoka** (uh-SHOH-kuh), Buddhist teaching and practice entered Sri Lanka (third century B.C.) and other parts of Southeast Asia. Monks carried the religion to China in the second century, Korea in the fourth century and to Japan and Tibet in the seventh century. Within the past two centuries, Europe and North America have increasingly felt the influence of the Buddhist tradition. Over half of the world's population live in areas where Buddhism has been, or is now, the dominant practice.

Theravada. Theravada (thai-ruh-VAH-duh) practice, is the most conservative, traditional school of Buddhism. Also called the southern social movement, this tradition goes back to one of the original 18 schools--the tradition of the elders. **Hinayana** (hin-ah-YAH- nah, lesser), a pejorative term, sometimes describes Theravada. Southeast Asia--specifically the countries of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Kampuchea--and Sri Lanka are home to this practice.

Mahayana. Mahayana (mah-hah-YAH-nah), which means the "great vehicle or course," is associated with Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Also called northern Buddhism, it includes the **Pure Land**, **Ch'an** (chahn [Zen]) and **Tantra** (TUHN-truh) trends of thought.



Buddha. Many names identify the historical Buddha. **Sakyamuni** refers to Buddha's clan (his being a "sage of the Sakya clan"). **Gautama** is his family name (like "Smith" in John Smith); **Siddhartha** (sid-HAHR-tah) his personal name. **Tathagata** (tuh-TAH-guh-tuh), "thus come one," is a title Gautama gave himself. It suggests the Buddha practiced what he preached.

Born to the warrior (**kshatriya**, KSHAT-ree-uh) class, in what is present day northwest India, Buddha was possessed wisdom far beyond his age and experience.

Four Sights. While a young man, he saw four sights--an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering ascetic--which prompted Gautama to retire from the world, undergo the great struggle, and attain enlightenment. The title "Buddha," meaning "enlightened, awakened one," refers to those who attain the enlightenment goal of Buddhist religious life.

Ashoka. Emperor Ashoka ruled India from 272 - 236 B.C. In conquering Kalinga (northern India and its environs), Ashoka's forces apparently slaughtered 100,000 people, deported 150,000 and spread famine and pestilence. In what might be seen as one of history's first recorded cases of post-traumatic stress syndrome, Ashoka embraced Buddhism, advocated religious tolerance, common ethical observance, an ending to violence and demonstrable social concern. His turn from "Ashoka the fierce" to "Ashoka the righteous" became a model for kingship held even now throughout Buddhist lands.

"As the great ocean has but one flavor, the taste of salt, so does the Doctrine and the Discipline of the Buddha have but one flavor--the flavor of emancipation." -- Anguttara-Nikaya VIII.II.ix (as quoted by Masao Abe, "Buddhism," in Our Religions, p. 72).

Belief. The acceptance of the truth of a body of facts without having absolute proof, a way of thinking about something--is not the critical emphasis in Buddhism. Practice, commitment, dedication in achieving is important. The quest for liberation, salvation, the following of the path leading to emancipation, are concerns central to Buddhism.

By design, Buddhism is a diverse practice. Gautama Buddha encouraged decentralization. There is no official Buddhist language. No central hierarchy governs all. The languages of the people, of whatever culture or nationality, become the languages of Buddhist expression. The long history of Buddhism (2,500 years), and the proliferation of its doctrine and scripture from the very start, contribute as well to this diversity.

Buddhist Terms

Definitions of the following concepts, central to Buddhism's world and life view, aid understanding.

Samsara (sahm-SAH-ruh), a Sanskrit term, refers to the cycle of rebirth and redeath--a turning around continually--experienced by all life.

Karma (KAHR-muh), "action/intention/deed," forms the basis for the law of karma--every action, every deed, has a result--both in the short term and over the long haul.

Nirvana (nihr-VAH-nuh), a term difficult to translate, means something akin to unalloyed bliss, pure and simple; fully passed away, fully blown out or fully extinct.

Anatman, *"devoid of self...[indicates] the Buddhist view that everything is transient and insubstantial, being without underlying reality or...continuing substrate."* (Robinson and Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, p. 237.)

Sangha (SHANG huh) The Sangha are specialists in the spiritual life. These monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, follow rules of the codified monastic discipline (Vinaya).

Transmigration (reincarnation) occurs when one's soul takes on rebirth in successive life forms.

Holidays and Observances

Buddhist Calendars. There is no single Buddhist calendar. Throughout East Asia, Buddhist dates vary between different schools of thought and national makeup. This is due to the many trends of practice within Buddhism, the diverse nature and importance of Bodhisattvas, unique national patriarchs, historical events and pre-Buddhist traditions which vary from country to country, the different calendars used-- whether lunar, lunisolar, Gregorian--and the date of the beginnings of the year.

Buddhist observances cluster around three areas:

- (1) events remembering the personage of **Buddha**, the **Dharma** (teaching) and **Sangha**;
- (2) rites incorporating remembrances tied to a **specific country or ethnic group's** context;
- (3) commemorations linked to the **agricultural/natural season**.

For purposes here, the focus is on festivals related to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Events Honoring the Buddha

Buddha's Birthday. **Visakha Puja** (vis-AHK-ah POO-jah) celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. According to legend, each one of these events occurred on the full-moon day of the lunar month of Visakha (April-May.)

It is the most holy day of the Buddhist calendar. Though festivals differ from country to country, most activities focus on temples and monasteries. People gather to listen to sermons and process in candle-lit movements around temples. Bodhi (BOH-dee) trees are cared for (the type of tree under which Buddha first received enlightenment), Buddha images cleaned, and pilgrimages made to sacred sites.

Buddha Images. Particular Buddha representations receive honor at differing times. Whether seen as physical representations of the enlightened one, heavenly Buddhas, or as objects worthy of reverence in their own right, ceremonies give respect to figures throughout the Buddhist world.

Relics. Devotion paid various Buddha relics (tooth, finger bone) can create extreme forms of devotional remembrance.

Dharma Celebrations. Particular texts receive veneration on specific days throughout East Asia.

In Theravada countries, the Three Baskets (Tripataka-- discourse, doctrine, discipline) are honored on the full moon of the eighth lunar month.

In Sri-Lanka, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia, the selfless generosity (dana) of young Prince Vassantara, who gives away all he has, only to be rewarded for his charity, is celebrated on a specific occasion. Merit-- and the importance of giving and doing meritorious deeds--is emphasized.

Festivals in Honor of the Sangha

Theravada countries honor the founding of the Sangha in Rajagriha in northern India by 1,250 arhats (AHR-huht--worthy ones). Particular celebrations, marking Sangha foundings, vary from country to country. Often such festivals last for several days with entertainment of plays, dances, comedians, movies and videos. Loudspeakers will blare popular music and announce meritorious gift givers.

The beginning and ending of monsoon rain retreats (July--October in Theravada countries) marks the time when the Sangha retreats for collective study and meditation.

Kathina festivals--where the Sangha receives new robes and wishing trees (gift bearing structures symbolizing trees)--mark the collective end to the rain retreat.

Sacred Texts

"...to summarize the main doctrines of normative Buddhism in one brief chapter is not only presumptuous, but since Buddhism is a luxuriant forest, it is almost impossible to identify all the main paths by which it might be traversed."

-- Buddhism and Society, by Melford Spiro, p. 31.

Though Buddhism possesses nothing similar to a Bible or Qur'an, it does have authoritative sacred texts.

The Pali (pah-lee) canon, the oldest grouping, forms the basis of Theravada and subsequent movements.

Chinese teachings, which preserve translations of texts originally composed in the Sanskrit language, elaborate further Mahayana practice.

The Tibetan canon is foundational for the Tantric trend.

Buddhist Themes in Daily Life

The motivational impact of Buddhism--its ability to provide an inner urge to move or prompt people to action--derives from a variety of factors.

Nirvana. Most obviously, the desire for Nirvana and positive rebirth stimulates moral behavior, giving, and meditation, all "instruments of salvation." Seen negatively, fear of hell inspires good action.

Contentment. Contentment arises from Buddhist influence. Meditation brings serenity. Worship, through offerings given, and mental state achieved, encourages tranquillity. Acceptance of one's position, especially for the poor, whereby karma justifies one's poverty, brings social stability. Cultivation of an open-hearted and sensitive attitude to others enriches one's own sense of peace in return.

No Self. A difficult, but nonetheless important, motivating ethical force is the concept of "no self" (anatman). The radical Buddhist view of the self sees it as a false, imaginary belief. There is no independent, autonomous soul, self or identity. Anatman ties individuals with all living beings.

Emphasis on one's own ego produces nothing but selfishness, harmful desire, this-world attachments, conceit and pride. Realizing anatman, one has compassion for others, identifies and sympathizes with them, and possesses genuine humility because all are one, "in the same boat" together.

Future Orientation. Buddhist practice--due to karma and its effects--sustains coping skills in difficulties. An irrepressible optimism, that the future is full of positive possibilities, helps in adversity. Even a sense of resignation assists to see one through great difficulty.

Ethics

Key ethical practices relate to the following:

Merit. Related to the concept of Karma, merit making is a basic Buddhist practice. Good deeds (meritorious ones) effect positive results in either this life or a future one. Bad deeds bring negative results. Though the Buddhist tradition developed different systematized ways to achieve merit (respecting elders, meditating, listening to sermons, observing moral precepts,) giving is the most commonly understood form of achieving positive merit (good karma), especially in Theravada schools of thought. Giving refers primarily to the material support offered by laymen and laywomen to the monastic community of monks and nuns.

Motivation in merit making involves

- (1) interest in future lifetime awards
- (2) obtaining enlightenment and escaping rebirth cycles
- (3) seeking to alleviate the suffering of others.

In Mahayana Buddhism, bodhisattvas (those who have experienced enlightenment but continue to be reborn to deliver others from suffering) possess large reservoirs of merit.

Middle Path. The Middle Path accentuates the humanity of the Buddhist ethic. Avoiding extremes-- either an overt pursuit of passionate world desire, or an austere discipline practiced by ascetics--enables individuals throughout the culture to exhibit moderation and grace.

The Five Precepts and Ethical Conduct. The Five Precepts and standards of ethical conduct encompass the minimum moral obligations of a lay Buddhist.

The Five Precepts are:

- [1] not to destroy life
- [2] not to steal
- [3] not to commit adultery
- [4] not to tell lies
- [5] not to take intoxicating drinks

These precepts are not commandments as such, but rules of training, and ideals to live up to. In time, these traits become the positive, expected norms by which people live.

Compassion. To demonstrate compassion--love, charity, kindness, tolerance and other such noble qualities--follows the Bodhisattva example of someone who renounces entry into Nirvana in order to help the living obtain release from suffering, rebirth and death.

Anatman provides the impetus. Rid of the notion of an ego, through meditation we expand our identity, coming more and more to be united with all living beings. This linkage puts one in the other's shoes, not because of a desire to love the unique individuality within the other, but to recognize a oneness with all. Compassion follows the Dhammapada teaching:

"Let one conquer wrath by meekness. Let one conquer wrong by goodness. Let one conquer the mean man by a gift and a liar by the truth."

Meditation. Meditation falls indirectly within the ethical realm. As Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula states,

"It is unfortunate that...[t]he moment the word 'meditation' is mentioned, one thinks of an escape from the daily activities of life; assuming a particular posture, like a statue in some cave or cell in a monastery, in some remote place cut off from society; and musing on, or being absorbed in, some kind of mystic or mysterious thought or trance. True Buddhist 'meditation' does not mean this kind of escape at all."

(What the Buddha Taught, p. 67.)

Meditation discipline is especially needed in urban, tension-ridden patterns of life. A calm and tranquil spirit enables a person to more efficiently do one's work. Meditation assists in developing this frame of mind.

Socio-economics. Anthropologist Melford Spiro studied Theravadan Burmese village life. Though conducted over thirty years ago, his insights still apply. Dr. Spiro found prosperity to be judged not by personal possessions or acquisitions. Rather, the condition and number of Buddhist temples and monasteries were deciding factors. (See Buddhism and Society, p. 396)

Economic development is not an end in itself. Rather, it reaches for a nobler purpose. Society must achieve certain minimal material standards so its population can achieve spiritual success. Wealth-- expressed in donations to monks and nuns, upkeep of pagodas and shrines, and purchasing animals from slaughter--is necessary. Merit (the good deeds of giving) is thus made.

Buddhism can provide business acumen. In addition to developing patience, perseverance, and endurance, it serves to hone a competitive edge. Business people may use Buddhist thought and practice, especially aspects of Zen, to enhance aggressive ambitions.

Women in Buddhist Thought

Buddhist Thought. The equality given women within the Sangha demonstrates the Buddhist ideal for society. *"The Buddha's equal concern for both sexes is made clear in a passage where he says that he would not die until the monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen were well trained."* (Dhammapada 11.104, Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism, p. 216.)

Due however, to pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation and uniting with the husband's family, in practice female rebirth became viewed in a less favorable light. During child bearing years, Theravadan Buddhist practice traditionally excludes women from major religious activity. Some Buddhist women are reasserting their desire for equality. The Venerable Chung Ok Lee, head minister of the Won Buddhist United Nations Office, is working to create a more unified, equality promoting social structure for men and women. Themes addressed in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in Sept. 1995 support such trends. (See Joel Beversluis, A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions, p. 273.)